

Potomac Profile

Charlie Palmer pulled the Student Association out of its CIA slump

By Dan Blackburn

There he was. The outgoing president of a nationwide organization, dressed in a rumpled white shirt and blue jeans, rolling on the coffee-stained beige carpet of his office while a large dog lunged playfully at him. Two staff members sat nearby on a sagging couch. Minutes earlier, the conversation focused on the problems of raising thousands of dollars to keep the organization going and to meet reparations demands of the National Association of Black Students. But weighty problems and light horse play mix easily for the outgoing president of the United States National Student Association. At 23, Charles F. Palmer had held the reins of the nation's oldest student organization for a year and his successor, David Ishin of Potomac, finds NSA considerably more stable financially than Palmer found it a year ago.

Staff members and fellow officers in the headquarters at 2115 S Street NW view Charles Palmer with a mixture of respect and genuine warmth that surfaces in casual conversations and good-natured banter. While he was still sprawled on his office floor with his rusty red and black dog Sancho towering over him, one bearded and grinning staff member announced, "We all used to push Charlie around. But then he started bringing Sancho with him and now we know who is boss!" Sancho, whose ears prick up at the mention of Charlie's name, has been described as part collie, part German shepherd and part people. He seems as much a part

of Charlie as the black mustache that adorns young Palmer's upper lip. By some contemporary standards, Charlie Palmer's hair is not really long and hardly deserves the description of shaggy. But it does hang down over his ears as, perhaps, sort of a symbol of NSA's moderation -- halfway between the campus radicals and the campus "straights." Once this spring, when Charlie was about to appear before national television cameras, his girl friend, Mary Lou Oates, trimmed his hair with some household scissors. She wanted him to have more appeal for Middle America. Charlie has recovered, but his black locks still have a tentative look about them. Washington Post columnist Nicholas Von Hoffman once wrote that "Charlie Palmer looks like Ernest Hemingway as a young man." It's not a bad description.

Charlie spent his pre-college days in the predominantly Mexican-American community of East Los Angeles and attended Woodrow Wilson High School where the student body was more than 60 per cent Chicano. His father, John Palmer, is a dedicated civil libertarian who works as a mechanical engineer. His Spanish-speaking mother, Selma, helped contribute an understanding of the community. A younger brother, Ralph, is now in college, although he is not necessarily following in his older brother's footsteps. Speaking Spanish was essential for Charlie in his position as guard on the Woodrow Wilson football team because that was the language in which the

signals were called. Language, however, was not the only problem. Charlie recalls, "In my senior year, the quarterback was a little Japanese guy who couldn't pass from the pocket and so he had to roll out all the time to pass the ball and he couldn't see over the line. So, when he rolled out, he would yell 'bend over' before he would throw. And, when we bent over, we got flattened."

When he wasn't getting flattened, Charlie was scoring solid grades in a school that saw few of its graduates go on to college. He had a flair for science and was accepted by the University of California at Berkeley to study for a degree in bio-chemistry. "It was like going to Disneyland," he says, "to be a freshman chemistry student at Berkeley and I was really scared because my high school background didn't seem as sharp as some of the others." To offset this sense of inferiority, he set up a schedule "that would make the Marines look soft. I had these charts accounting for all my time, including two hours for recreation." Hair trimmed short enough to please the most conservative critic, he arrived on the Berkeley campus in the fall of 1964--the year the Free Speech Movement began. But the highly publicized movement seems to have had little immediate impact on determined Charlie Palmer. He stayed with bio-chemistry for two and a half years, including a stint as an analyst for the U.S. Forest Service, before switching to political science and taking honors in political theory. The work with